

## **FISH & WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET**

**Meeting Date:** July 13, 2016

**Agenda Item:** North Shore Wildlife Management Area Farming Lease (R1)

**Division:** Wildlife

**Action Needed:** Final

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 10 minutes

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### **Background**

FWP is proposing a 5-year agricultural lease of 359 acres of the 429-acre North Shore WMA. The WMA is on the north shore of Flathead Lake adjacent to a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Waterfowl Production Area. During winter and spring migration, waterfowl flock to the fields to forage on food plots and waste grain. The property has a long history of crop production, and for several years has been leased to multiple growers in exchange for property services and leave crops to support wildlife. With existing leases expiring in September, 2016, FWP seeks to unify property management by developing a single-grower, five-year agricultural lease to continue this successful management approach. As proposed, the lessee would cultivate, plant, control weeds and retain a portion (up to 85 percent) of the grain crop harvest, leaving stubble and the remaining crop standing for wildlife during winter and spring migration, primarily to benefit waterfowl and upland game birds.

### **Public Involvement Process & Results**

FWP has leased these fields for several years, and the public has been involved and supportive throughout that process. The public comment period on the EA for the Proposed Action closed on June 19 and a Decision Notice was signed June 23. FWP received nine written comments; six in support of the preferred alternative – the agricultural lease of the North Shore WMA to improve habitat for waterfowl and upland game. Supporters stated their approval for the project because it would benefit wildlife, particularly waterfowl and upland game, the local agrarian economy, and public recreation. Three comments were received expressing concern that the 5-year lease duration was too long and would unduly restrict management.

### **Alternatives and Analysis**

Under the “No Action” alternative, agricultural lands would not be cultivated and FWP would need to commit resources to manage weeds on the previously cultivated 359 acres of farm fields, and wildlife would be negatively impacted by lack of cover and winter and spring forage for migrating waterfowl. A multi-year lease for the entire WMA increases the attractiveness of the lease opportunity, and by extension the terms FWP can negotiate. The net result will be improved wildlife benefits including larger leave areas, additional food plots, and buffer strips – all contributing to improved habitat and hunting opportunities. In addition, as explained in the Draft Environmental Assessment, the lease terms will provide the flexibility to implement restoration during the lease agreement period, potentially reducing cropland area by upwards of 92 acres. Thus, FWP derives the benefits of multi-year lease without hampering our ability to implement habitat improvements.

### **Agency Recommendation & Rationale**

Because of the importance of these properties to migrating waterfowl, existing crops, weed control, and the zero cash cost to the agency, FWP recommends that the Commission approve the proposed course of action.

### **Proposed Motion**

I move that the Commission approve the 5-year agricultural lease for the North Shore WMA as proposed.